Swedish environmental and sustainability education research in the era of post-politics?

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The special issue New Swedish environmental and sustainability education research, published in Education & Democracy 20(1), introduced a novel generation of Swedish ESD research. With the intention to spur academic debate this rejoinder offers alternative interpretations of some of the findings in the special issue. The article contests the special issue's proclaimed distinction between empirical studies and ideological debate in the field of ESD research, and points to the contradiction between the special issue's promotion of 'pluralism' and the absence of critical interrogations of sustainable development. Theoretically informed by post-Marxist thought the concept post-politics is employed to shed new light on sustainable development and its companion ESD. It is argued that the contributions in the special issue are partly embedded in a post-political logic and that several findings are open for far more radical interpretations. This suggests, ultimately, that there is a need for alternative pathways that can challenge and complement mainstream ESD research.

Keywords: education for sustainable development, post-politics, 'the political', post-Marxism, conflict, hegemony, articulation, responsibilization, sustainable development.

Introduction

The special issue *New Swedish environmental and sustainability education research*, published in *Education & Democracy 20(1)*, offers an interesting collection of articles from a new generation of researchers affiliated to the *Graduate School in Education and Sustainable Development* (GRESD). It is very inspiring to note that

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GRESD has been able to attract a critical mass of scholars and PhD students engaged in knowledge production within this important academic field. It is precisely because of the importance of this research that I wish, in this rejoinder, to initiate a dialogue with the GRESD environment and offer an alternative perspective. This perspective is inspired by post-Marxist theoretical traditions and it takes the academic debate on the phenomenon commonly referred to as *post-politics* as a starting-point. By employing this perspective, this rejoinder will offer alternative readings and shed new light on some of the findings presented in the aforementioned special issue. Hopefully, this will spur academic debate and perhaps even inspire someone to pursue a different approach to future research in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

This rejoinder takes issue with two claims articulated by the guest editor Johan Öhman in the introduction to the special issue. Firstly, Öhman depicts the GRESD environment (and, presumably, the contributors of the special issue) as strongly committed to empirical research, as opposed to other groups of scholars within the field who, according to Öhman, have primarily been engaged in ideological debate (Öhman, 2011). This distinction is interesting but it also raises some questions. Is it really possible to draw such a clear boundary between empirical studies and ideological debate within the field of ESD research? Could it even be that many of the contributions in the special issue themselves rest on certain ideological assumptions that have perhaps not been fully recognized and problematized? This rejoinder will provide a few examples that point in the direction of the latter. Hence, the argument will be put forth that these empirical contributions are partly embedded in precisely the kind of ideology that researchers with a more political take on ESD, including myself, criticize. Secondly, rightfully in my opinion, Öhman is open for the idea that sustainable development is a concept that might conceal ideological tensions and contradictions. He also recognizes that some scholars have issued warnings that ESD is running the risk of turning into a political instrument. Yet, Öhman continues, ESD does not have to be restricted to UNESCO's definition. It can be interpreted and negotiated in different ways and this is why it is important that ESD research explores how such multiple meanings unfold in educational practice (Öhman, 2011). However, in light of the claim to highly value pluralism, multiple meanings and variety of opinions, I find surprisingly few attempts in this special issue to really challenge and offer any radical interrogation of sustainable development. With consideration to the sheer number of scholars and PhD students affiliated to GRESD *and* the manifoldness that the format of a special issue allows for,

one might suggest that it ought to have made room for such contributions. Hence, largely in line with the pluralism that Öhman wants to promote, this rejoinder will attempt to complement the findings in the special issue by offering some alternative interpretations.

The article is organized in five sections. These short introductory notes are followed by a second section which provides a brief elaboration of the article's theoretical perspective and the notion of post-politics. The third section argues that this perspective has general purchase in studies of sustainable development. Based on this theoretical perspective, the fourth section offers alternative interpretations of some of the findings presented in the GRESD special issue. The final section summarizes the main arguments and suggests some alternative pathways which critical ESD-researchers might pursue.

Post-politics and its discontents

In the past decades a number of critical scholars, stemming from different post-Marxist theoretical traditions, have brought attention to a widespread tendency in contemporary political life whereby politics and policy-making is becoming increasingly consensus-oriented and technocratic (e.g. Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 1999; Tesfahuney & Dahlstedt, 2008, Žižek, 1999). Several of these scholars have employed the concept *post-politics* to capture this political phenomenon and the logic that underpins it. In mainstream debate the post-political trend has often been interpreted as a sound *development* from an obsolete stage of political conflicts to a higher stage, beyond 'the political', characterized by consensus, expertise and utility maximization. This notion of an effective 'apolitical' exercise of government is not new. Similar ideas have been both expressed and embraced by scholars such as Herbert Tingsten in the 1950s and Francis Fukuyama in the 1990s. However, in stark contrast to these thinkers, critical scholars have expressed serious concern with this trend arguing that it severely undermines democracy. There is no space here to make a thorough inventory of the different scholars and theoretical traditions that criticizes the post-political *Zeitgeist*. Yet, it is possible to make a few general remarks on the defining features of post-politics. Characteristic of post-politics is to offer sophisticated, technical and administrative solutions to 'problems' that are in fact related to conflicts of interest and inequality. Thus, post-politics attempts to *depoliticize* societal conflicts but it is extremely important to realize that this depoliticization is in itself political. It is closely associated with neoliberal ideology and the conviction that there is only one way forward, i.e. to promote

economic growth, marketization, privatization and entrepreneurship. This notion has obvious resonance in famous political maxims such as Thatcher's *There Is No Alternative (TINA)* and New Labour's *The Third Way*. The concept *post-politics* therefore becomes a useful tool to reimagine 'the political' in what appears to be *a*political (Mouffe, 2005, Tesfahuney & Dahlstedt, 2008).

The post-political efforts to depoliticize can be analytically divided into two main processes. Firstly, attempts to downplay conflicts of interest and promote the idea that we can reach rational 'win-win' solutions to all kinds of societal problems. This is normally done through sophisticated policy formulations and political rhetoric. Conceptual elasticity is of great importance in these hegemonic articulations since the illusion must be conveyed that a consensus is achievable and that it will favour all concerned parties. The language normally also has a strong moral aura to it, suggesting that there are superior ethical solutions beyond the vested interests of particular groups. This trend in contemporary politics has been vigorously criticized by Mouffe (2005) amongst others. The essence of Mouffe's perspective is that conflict is inevitable in political life. An antagonistic dimension is constitutive of the 'the political' and whether we like it or not 'the political' forms part of our ontological condition. Hence, a political conflict is by definition one to which no rational solution could possibly exist and this means that properly political questions inevitably involve choices between conflicting interests. Interests, however, should not be understood as predetermined as conventional Marxism suggests. Rather, they should be seen as historically contingent constructs, generated by a process of articulation which establishes a boundary line between 'us' and 'them'. Ultimately, Mouffe argues, this means that democracy requires the formation of political identities and visible conflict between competing hegemonic projects. Hence, conflicts of interest should not be downplayed but recognized so that they can be made amenable to legitimate agonistic debate. Since contemporary post-politics conceals conflicts of interest it actually, despite sophisticated claims to do otherwise, threatens the very lifeblood of democracy (Mouffe, 2005).

Secondly, post-politics involves an increasing reallocation of decisions from the public to the private sphere. Hence, matters that previously resided within the traditional political realm become subject to individual choice based on consumer preferences. Critical scholars have argued that this process entails a strong element of responsibilization since the individual subject is expected to find individual solutions to structural problems and contradictions (e.g. Mouffe, 2005, Tesfahuney & Dahlstedt, 2008). Individual responsi-

bility, competence, adjustment, flexibility and entrepreneurship are thus thought of as panaceas to problems that are deeply embedded in the economic system. The bottom-line is that it is not the system that should be transformed, but it is the individual subject that must become resilient. The concept *resilience* is very important to highlight in this context since it is often mentioned in positive terms. Yet, it goes hand in hand with neoliberal ideology and post-political modes of government. As argued by Reid the resilient subject is ultimately 'politically debased', i.e. the neoliberal governing art of 'making up' adaptable and resilient subjects involves degradation of their political capacities and their abilities to resist (Reid, 2012). Finally, there is - once again - a moral dimension to this post-political process since issues that are essentially of political nature become discursively transformed into a yoke of individual moral responsibility. The individual subject is expected to take on this responsibility by means of consumer choice, self-regulation, and mobilization of entrepreneurial competence (Mouffe, 2005, Tesfahuney & Dahlstedt, 2008).

As will be evident below I will argue that this perspective has much to offer in the field of ESD research and I will employ it to provide alternative interpretations of some of the findings in the GRESD special issue. However, first a few words on 'the political' in development.

'The political' in (sustainable) development

The development debate has not been unaffected by the post-political trend. Some have even argued that post-politics and mainstream development thinking have close or even symbiotic relationships (Tesfahuney & Dahlstedt, 2008). Now, societal *development* is an essentially contested concept (Gallie, 1956). Quite naturally there are also an abundance of definitions to be found in the literature. Yet, in a very general sense, most conventional understandings of development would suggest that it is a process that involves some kind of societal change for the better whereby certain societal problems are solved or at least mitigated.[1] However, although often overlooked in the mainstream debate, development is never politically neutral. In every society there are different opinions about what constitutes change 'for the better' and you will also find different definitions of the 'problems' that need to be rectified. Moreover, when a society changes, some groups are likely to find themselves in a more favourable position whereas other will experience some kind of, at least relative, decline. This is why *development* and *conflict* are intimately related, a basic

theoretical point of departure for the academic discipline Peace and Development Research. Indeed it is extremely difficult to envision societal change without the emergence of dialectical tensions and conflicts between different interests (Cowen & Shenton, 1996, Nederveen Pieterse, 2010). Hence, 'the political' inevitably forms part of development, but as indicated above this has often been ignored in the mainstream development debate. This tendency is, for example, very clear in the field of international development cooperation (Knutsson & Lindberg, 2012).

Sustainable development, which today forms part and parcel of the mainstream development debate, has taken things one step further and could very well be understood as post-politics *par excellence*. After all economic growth, profit and market penetration are supposed to walk hand in hand with a vast range of social equity concerns on a global scale while at the same time making sure that eco-systems are sustained and that no serious damage is caused to the natural environment. To me it seems reasonable to suggest that it is only in the post-political imaginary that this equation can be solved. Nevertheless, by means of sophisticated post-political rhetoric, powerful institutions have been quite successful in perpetuating the message that there are no fundamental conflicts between these different interests. Therefore it should come as no surprise that the widely recognized definition of sustainable development in the report *Our Common Future* is full of paradoxes and contradictions (Rist, 2008). Yet, the elegant wording of the report conveys the deceptive impression that incompatible goals can be achieved simultaneously and that a consensus to the benefit of everybody is possible to establish. This is most likely the reason why it has been possible to mobilize worldwide support for sustainable development, i.e. the tremendous success of this idea is due to its elasticity. However, as pointed out by Rist, a closer examination of the definition presented in *Our Common Future* shows that it is in fact *development* that is supposed to be sustainable, 'not the tolerance capacity of eco-systems or human societies' (Rist 2008, p 194). This reminds us of the post-political conviction to uphold the economic system while rendering individual subjects and local communities resilient.

There is also a strong element of individual responsibilization in sustainable development. Not only in terms of promotion of certain consumption patterns among the wealthier individuals of the world's population, i.e. consume *more* and consume *right* so as to cater for both economic growth and social and environmental sustainability, but also in relation to the vast numbers of the world's poor who are expected to develop the necessary entrepreneurial skills to become

self-reliant and resilient to all kinds of economic and ecologic shocks. As argued by Duffield, one of the most prominent scholars in the contemporary development debate, the commonplace conception of development in international aid basically boils down to 'a sustainable process of self-management that has economic self-sufficiency at its core' (Duffield 2001, p 101). Since mass consumption for all is not a viable option due to global resource constraints, poor people beyond the borders of mass consumption must be governed to settle for self-reliance (Duffield 2001, 2007). One does not have to dig too deep into much of international development cooperation to realize that Duffield has a valid point.

As indicated above sustainable development is an elastic concept and Öhman is of course right when he states that it can be interpreted in many different ways. However, if we stop for a moment and consider how so-called sustainable development is understood and put into practice by powerful institutions worldwide such as governments, international financial institutions, multi-national corporations and international development agencies, i.e. actors that exercise a tremendous hegemonic influence on the thinking and everyday lives of the world's population, then I think it is fair to suggest that a post-political interpretation of sustainable development will take us quite far. Hence, I would like to encourage anyone interested in sustainable development to consider the claims of this paper. If it can be accepted that there is a hegemonic conception of sustainable development that is strongly influenced by post-politics and if one is of the opinion that this is somehow discomforting, then this obviously raises some concerns about the role of ESD and the importance of pursuing a critical approach to this field. This brings us to next section of this article.

Swedish ESD research in the era of post-politics?

Drawing on the critique of post-politics outlined above, this section will offer alternative interpretations of some of the findings that are presented in the GRESD special issue. It should by now be clear that my critical readings are based on different and more radical theoretical traditions. Hence, I have little interest in questioning the research methods or the accuracy of the presented data in these articles as such. My points are simply that: (1) many of the conclusions that are presented regarding ESD can be interpreted in a different, and more critical, way; (2) it is impossible to maintain a clear boundary between

empirical research and ideological debate in the field of ESD research. Now, as indicated above, there are strong elements of downplaying conflicts of interest and promoting individual responsibilization in the sustainable development discourse. These post-political logics are, unsurprisingly, transposed to ESD and they can also be discerned in several of the contributions in the GRESD special issue.

In the article *Measuring attitudes towards three values that underlie sustainable development,* the authors use quantitative data to map young people's attitudes towards sustainable development (Torbjörnsson, Molin & Karlberg 2011). No objections are raised against the authors' measure instrument or their survey as such. However, the manner in which they discuss their results raises some questions. In the very last sentence the authors make an appeal for 'solidarity with all: no one mentioned, no one forgotten' (Torbjörnsson, Molin & Karlberg 2011, p. 116). This has a nice ring to it. Yet, it is a post-political notion and it is in fact the very act of absenting the person that makes it possible to pursue this claim. Even though solidarity with all sounds beautiful it constitutes a fundamental denial of 'the political'. It is only in the post-political imaginary that it is possible to show solidarity with, for example, representatives of the feminist struggle and at the same time show solidarity with representatives of the patriarchate. The same goes, of course, for associations for poor workers versus exploitative capitalists; environmental activists versus multinational oil companies; and national resistance movements versus occupying powers. Such actors articulate different interests, they are engaged in a struggle for different hegemonic projects, and in the act of doing so they develop different political identities (Mouffe, 2005). Of note here is that such 'antagonisms are not *objective* relations, but relations which reveal the limits of all objectivity' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1986, p xiv, emphasis in original). Now, the concept 'solidarity' is of course open for different interpretations. Yet it seems reasonable to suggest, at least from a post-Marxist perspective, that solidarity is an inclusive concept and that it is impossible to imagine inclusion without some kind of exclusion, i.e. solidarity requires a demarcation line between 'us' and 'them'. Here it might be useful to remind ourselves of Mouffe's argument that the notion of a political adversary and the competition between different hegemonic projects is in fact the very lifeblood of democracy (Mouffe, 2005). From such perspective Torbjörnsson, Molin and Karlberg end up wrong when they turn to neo-pragmatism. By reference to Rorty the authors claim that 'attitudes to solidarity are a question of learning' (Torbjörnsson, Molin & Karlberg, 2011, p 116). But is it primarily a matter of learning? Is it not primarily a matter of

politics? Torbjörnsson, Molin and Karlberg are of course right in their claim that the circuit of 'we' can be extended far beyond the neighbourhood. True. However, there are limits to how far solidarity can be stretched, not geographical limits but *political* limits. You simply cannot show solidarity with all, it is an ontological impossibility. To deny this is an impasse. Instead, as argued by Mouffe, the trick is to build democratic institutions that enable us to deal with conflicts of interest in an agonistic way. In the context of ESD the first step in such a process is to recognize that there are conflicts of interest and that the post-political sustainable development discourse attempts to conceal this. If one subscribes to this argument, then it seems fair to suggest that neo-pragmatic perspectives offer limited guidance. Säfström, himself a neo-pragmatist, has in a commendable way acknowledged that Mouffe's arguments draw attention to some substantial weaknesses in neo-pragmatic thinking (Säfström, 2006). In my opinion this insightful observation ought to be seriously considered in contemporary ESD research.

A business to change the world presents an analysis of economy textbooks in Swedish upper secondary school. The article discloses different 'offers of meaning' that economy students are exposed to, as regards business people's moral responsibility for environment and society (Andersson, Öhman and Östman, 2011). I totally agree with the authors that textbook analysis can be a powerful tool to expose educational conceptions, but I have a few objections against their analytical procedure and the 'meanings' that they offer to the *reader* in their conclusions. From the perspective of this rejoinder, these meanings are limiting in the sense that they reside entirely within, and thus fail to challenge, the post-political sustainable development discourse. Andersson, Öhman and Östman claim to be concerned about the fact that students are exposed to an ideology that separates politics and economy. Yet, it is difficult to find anything in their discussion that takes serious issue with 'the political' in sustainable development. On the contrary the article largely conveys a post-political logic. Firstly, the article does not recognize any fundamental conflicts between promoting profit-oriented business, social equality and ecological balance. The optimistic post-political analysis suggests that these different goals can be achieved simultaneously. Secondly, the authors claim to pursue a *critical* perspective towards neo-classical economic theory. However, the scope of this criticism can be seriously debated. As indicated by the title, business is conceptualized by the authors as a potential driver of sustainable development and they suggest that there ought to be more space for this 'offer of meaning' in education. This is completely in line with arguments forwarded by

the World Bank and the IMF, financial institutions whose ideology is essentially based on neo-classical economic thinking. As indicated above, the positive take on business, profit and economic growth that permeates the hegemonic sustainable development discourse is a basic prerequisite for the World Bank's and IMF's strong commitment to sustainable development. The point is that the so-called 'critical' approach of the authors extends no further than that the World Bank and the IMF would happily subscribe to it. Thirdly, the authors suggest that the meaning *following legal and/or consumer demands* has obvious limitations in relation to sustainable development, and they suggest that more focus is given to the *tool for change* meaning. This questioning of the role of legal frameworks goes hand in hand with the post-political logic of moving political decisions from the traditional political realm to the private sphere. A redirection of focus from legal instruments to the benevolence of the individual business persons is basically portrayed by the authors as a progressive step in ESD. Whether this is progressive or not can certainly be debated. Moreover, the authors' merger of legal restrictions and consumer demands into one single category entitled *following legal and/or consumer demands* raises some questions. A law is the outcome of a democratic process whereas consumer demand is a result of the market mechanism. There is a huge ideological difference between favouring legal instruments and favouring market solutions in environmental policy, but the broad meaning category introduced by the authors blur these fundamental ideological differences. Hence, it is highly questionable whether these different 'offers of meaning' should belong to the same category. Fourthly, as indicated above, Andersson, Öhman and Östman argue that the *tool for change* meaning should be offered more space in education. This 'offer of meaning' puts emphasis on the moral responsibility of the individual business person and her/his potential as an agent of change. This is completely in line with the post-politics logic that reduces 'the political' to a matter of individual moral and action-competence. Responsible individual entrepreneurs with high moral standards are expected to deal with, or even solve, problems generated by the prevailing economic system. In stark contrast to this idea it could very well be argued that systemic transformation is necessary and that this requires collective political action. Regardless of how one positions oneself in this controversy, it is quite obvious that favoring a *tool for change* meaning is not politically neutral and thus that a clear distinction between empirical research and ideological debate is impossible to maintain in ESD research.

Bursjöö's article *How student teachers form their educational practice in relation to sustainable development* investigates how

experienced student teachers reflect professionally on ESD (Bursjöö, 2011). This contribution is one of the most interesting in the GRESD special issue in the sense that it brings tensions and conflicts of interest to the fore. This is of paramount importance in ESD research. Yet, from the perspective of this rejoinder, Bursjöö does not challenge the post-political sustainable development discourse and consequently some of the presented results and conclusions are open for different, and more critical, interpretations. The student teachers in Bursjöö's study have a very positive attitude towards sustainable development, but at the same time they express feelings of guilt and shame for being unable to live in accordance with their ideals. This is a very good example of post-politics in operation. The fact that the student teachers feel guilt and shame clearly illustrates the logics of individual responsibilization. It demonstrates, in an exemplary manner, how sustainable development is *not* conceptualized as 'political', but is redefined as a matter of individual moral and action-competence. These benevolent student teachers basically internalize conflicts that are built-in to the economic system and this is precisely what the post-political ideology wants them to do. This angle, however, is not discussed or problematized in the article. In the final section Bursjöö suggests that recent research is pointing out some promising future avenues for ESD, including: resilience; action-competence; and deliberative communication. These concepts can of course be understood and negotiated in different ways and they do not necessarily have to be thought of as expressions of post-politics. Nevertheless, I think there are very strong reasons for ESD researchers to maintain a critical perspective and, at least, consider their close connections to post-politics and what implications this might have for practical implementation of ESD. There are strong political forces that promote individual responsibilization, and concepts such as resilience and action-competence fits perfectly into this ideology. I have already issued warnings about the concept resilience and there is no reason to repeat that argument here. However, a couple of comments in relation to action-competence might be useful. There are two conditions under which the concept runs the risk of turning into a post-political tool. Firstly, if it becomes a pretext for teachers to convey the message that it is possible for pupils to overcome the inherent contradictions of sustainable development solely, or primarily, through *individual* actions (c.f. below). Secondly, if the message is conveyed that the inbuilt conflicts in sustainable development could somehow be overstepped as long as the pupil becomes equipped with the 'right' kind of rational, neutral, apolitical *competence*. As I have argued above development is inevitably 'political'. Hence there can be no 'rational' development

that will benefit all causes and we are inevitably forced to make choices between conflicting alternatives. There is no competence in the world that can make us move beyond this ontological condition. This is why it so important that teachers promote political *Bildung* and that ESD is taught in a way that makes it clear that development is ultimately a matter of politics. In other words: if it is any kind of competence that is needed it is the competence to perceive the world in a 'political' way. If one, for some reason, wants to save the concept action-competence in the context of ESD this is probably the best way to go. Finally, the concept of deliberative communication also requires a remark. As indicated in above, Mouffe has sharply criticized modernist proponents of 'rational' deliberation and their strong faith in 'win-win' solutions that can transcend power structures and move beyond 'the political' (Mouffe, 2005). Hence, before joining these proponents of modernity, rationality and 'superior' ethical solutions, it is probably wise to critically consider the limitations of deliberative communication and what implications these might have in the context of ESD.

The contribution *Worry becomes hope in education for sustainable development* looks into the prospects of combining action-orientated pedagogy with a pluralistic view of ESD, and it investigates how action research can be used to turn students' worry about the future into action-competence and hope (Persson, Lundegård & Wickman, 2011). From the perspective of this rejoinder, the contribution has certain important merits. While focusing on lifestyle and individual consumer preferences the article also highlight structural problems and the importance of political decisions in attempting to handle them. Hence, as compared to the other contributions in the special issue, there is more emphasis on collective political action in Persson, Lundegård and Wickman's article. Bringing in such a focus is of crucial importance in the field of ESD research. Nevertheless, the contribution also raises some questions. Firstly, the theoretical framework of the article entails six strategies that are assumed to restore young people's faith in the future and transform their worry into hope. What is surprising about these strategies is that they do not appear to pin any faith at all to collective political mobilization and political confrontation. This is quite strange bearing in mind that most historical examples of structural transformation, e.g. the introduction of universal suffrage in Sweden and the demise of apartheid in South Africa, entailed a strong component of political struggle. Yet, emphasis appears to be on technological solutions, positive thinking, individual actions and a rather diffuse trust in 'humanity' as if it was a single entity. There are in fact some striking similarities between these six strategies and the post-political language employed in the

report *Our common future* (WCED 1987). As indicated above, Rist has offered a very interesting deconstruction of these speech acts which I urge anyone interested in sustainable development to look into (Rist, 2008). Secondly, the article obviously makes a case for transforming students' worry into hope. Nurturing hope is of course important. Nobody, regardless of their political preferences, would argue against that. The question, however, is hope of *what*? Should one encourage hope in the prevailing economic system? Should one encourage hope that is possible, as *Our Common Future* suggests, to 'make way for a new era of economic growth' and that limits to development are 'not absolute limits but limitations imposed by the present stage of technology and social organization on environmental resources' (WCED 1987, p 8)? This is certainly open for debate. The formulations in *Our Common Future* make it quite clear though that sustainable development has little to offer anyone that is critical of the economic growth doctrine and the idea that ecological limits can be made flexible through technology and resilience. Should one perhaps encourage hope in a completely different economic model? And in collective political mobilization as a means to bring about such change? If it is this kind of hope that one would prefer to nurture then this definitely raises some inconvenient questions. Is the concept sustainable development really of any help at all? If not, what are the implications for ESD? The point I am trying to make here is, of course, that hope is not politically neutral in the context of ESD.

There are two more contributions in the GRESD special issue. The article *Cosmopolitan perspectives on education and sustainable development - between universal ideals and particular values* explores how four prominent representatives of contemporary cosmopolitan thought manage the balance between universal and particular values and, thereafter, discusses how a cosmopolitan perspectives might contribute to the development of ESD practice (Sund & Öhman, 2011). The paper *Knowledge capabilities for sustainable development in global classrooms – local challenges* uses a phenomenographic approach to investigate the experiences of pupils, teachers and principals involved in a project based on online learning for sustainable development (Nordén & Anderberg, 2011). The content and character of these contributions are slightly different as compared to the others and this makes them less tangible in relation to the two major arguments I am trying to make in this rejoinder. For example, despite the statement in the introduction to the special issue, Sund's and Öhman's contribution is not an empirical study but a theoretical paper. Nordén's and Anderberg's contribution, on the other hand, has an empirical dimension but the paper discusses learning and knowledge

capabilities on such a general level that the concept of sustainable development becomes more or less redundant. This, in turn, makes the paper difficult to approach in the context of this rejoinder. On the other hand, and this might be important to underscore, none of these two contributions lead up to conclusions that are remotely in line with the post-Marxist perspective embraced in this rejoinder. Hence, in order to avoid criticism for completely omitting these papers from the discussion I shall make a couple of, very brief, remarks. Although Sund and Öhman claim that their main argument is that ESD should be explored as a political project they seem, at least in my interpretation, to be much more concerned about finding moral foundations than with discussing 'the political' in ESD. After all, they turn to cosmopolitan philosophers in order to discuss the so-called 'problem of normativity'. From a post-Marxist perspective this would be a non-starter. As argued by Mouffe cosmopolitanism forms part of a general denial of 'the political'. It fails to recognize that the world is structured by power relations and that each social order has a hegemonic dimension (Mouffe, 2005). Hence, cosmopolitanism and the post-political imaginary walks hand in hand. My second remark has to do with the authors' concern about a universalistic bias in ESD and the need to balance this against local particularities. Coming from a different theoretical tradition I would approach this problem in an entirely different way. Things are rarely as they seem and just because ESD is framed as universal in the hegemonic policy discourse this should not be taken at face value. There are strong reasons to believe that ESD, as a set of global practices, is anything but universal but, quite to the contrary, implemented within a biopolitical regime that distinguishes between different forms of life (c.f. Duffield, 2007; Hellberg, 2012, 2013; Reid, 2012). I will return to this argument below. As indicated above Nordén's and Anderberg's contribution is preoccupied with learning and their arguments unfold on a very general level. However, of note is that the article contains no reflections on 'the political' in sustainable development. Hence one might at least consider the risk that the knowledge capability approach for global learning, embraced by the authors, could turn into a post-political tool (c.f. above).

Conclusions

ESD research is becoming increasingly important and there is little indication that this trend will be reversed in the foreseeable future. Therefore, it is gratifying to note that the establishment of GRESD has generated a productive academic environment with vast inter-

national networks. Nevertheless, since I am deeply troubled by the strong influence that post-political logics exercise on the sustainable development discourse, and its companion ESD, I have felt compelled to offer a critical perspective. In this final section I will forward two concluding remarks and make an appeal to the new generation of ESD researchers affiliated to GRESD and elsewhere to, at least, consider alternative and more critical approaches in the future.

This rejoinder has contested two claims articulated in the introduction of the GRESD special issue. Firstly, Öhman suggested a distinction between empirical research and ideological debate in the academic field of ESD. This rejoinder has vigorously argued that such a distinction is illusory. This is not so strange. Although rarely recognized in mainstream public and academic debate, there is no such thing as *a*political development. Nor can there be any *a*political development research. This was highlighted more than half a century ago even by a fairly conventional development scholar such as Gunnar Myrdal, and today this is a basic theoretical point of departure for development researchers outside the academic mainstream. Since 'the political' inevitably forms part of development and development research, there can hardly be any *a*political ESD research either. As I have argued throughout this rejoinder, many of the articles in the GRESD special issue entail certain ideological assumptions that are not fully recognized, or at least not problematized, by the authors. The concept post-politics, thus, seems to be a useful tool to reimagine 'the political' in what appears to be *a*political. Secondly, Öhman made the claim that ESD does not have to be limited to the UNESCO version, but that it can be interpreted and negotiated in different ways. He also underscored, alongside most contributors in the special issue, the merits of pursuing a 'pluralistic' approach to ESD. But if this is so, where are the critical voices? There is not a single contribution in the special issue that offers any *radical* interrogation of sustainable development, or that elaborates on the 'offer of meaning' that fundamental transformation of the economic system is required if we are not to cause irreversible damage to the planet. Rather, many of the findings convey a post-political logic that downplays conflicts of interest and redefines 'the political' in terms of individual moral, competence and resilience. Hence, there obviously seem to be discursive limits to the proposed 'pluralism'.

We live in times where much is at stake although powerful institutions are trying their best to conceal this. These agents exercise enormous hegemonic influence on people worldwide regarding the merits and prospects of sustainable development. These hegemonic processes include sophisticated attempts to downplay conflicts of interest that

are in fact fundamental to the future of the planet, and technical arrangements whereby structural problems become converted into matters of individual responsibility. As I see it, researchers have an important task to challenge this hegemonic influence. Unfortunately though, much ESD research has a tendency to align with mainstream development logics and this is why it is so important that critical voices are raised and heard. Therefore, without claiming to be the first to make these observations, I would like to suggest some alternative pathways that critical ESD researchers might pursue. One way forward, as emphasized in this article, would be to draw on post-Marxist thought (e.g. Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, Mouffe, 2005) and critically consider the role of ESD in post-political hegemonic articulations. A second pathway, drawing on governmentality readings of sustainable development (e.g. Hellberg, 2013; Luke, 1999; Rutherford, 2007), would be to approach ESD as a liberal technology of government that aims to produce responsible and resilient subjects. Elsewhere Öhman and Öhman have made some interesting contributions in this theoretical tradition (e.g. Öhman & Öhman, 2008). Yet, in my argument, more research can be done on how subjects engage productively with ESD, as a *technology of responsibilization,* in terms of agency, practice, subjectivity and resistance. A third pathway, drawing on biopolitical approaches to sustainable development (e.g. Duffield, 2007; Hellberg, 2012, 2013; Reid, 2012), could be to explore the role of ESD in a global biopolitical regime that distinguishes between different forms of life. In other words: make a case for critical comparative ESD research. It is my intention to elaborate further on these propositions in forthcoming work. Hopefully, this can extend the scope of the pluralism embraced by GRESD and propel healthy academic debate within the field.

Note

1. Note that critical scholars like for example Duffield (2007), Escobar (2012) and Rist (2008) do not subscribe to such conventional understandings of development but offer much more radical conceptualizations.

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